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Accounting for Cross-Country Differences in Employee Involvement Practices: Comparative Case Studies in Germany, Brazil and China

Martin Krzywdzinski

Abstract

Employee involvement is a contested concept in organizations. While the mainstream of the research debate has focused on measuring the strength of employee involvement (EI), this article emphasizes the existence of very different forms of EI. It draws on case studies of the German, Brazilian and Chinese plants of a German automobile manufacturer to analyse forms of EI and to investigate their societal determinants. The article reveals considerable differences in the design of employee involvement between the self-organization model and the competition/social involvement model. It shows how industrial relations and cultural factors lead to these very different approaches.

1. Introduction

Employee involvement is a contested idea: while some authors see it as a core element of HR concepts influencing employee motivation and engagement (Appelbaum *et al*. 2000; Pil and MacDuffie 1996), others question its impact (cf. Vidal 2007) or criticize it as a managerial technique of work intensification (cf. Ramsay *et al*. 2000). In this article, I suggest that this controversy is in part due to the implicitly universalistic assumptions of many studies, which focus on measuring the *strength* of employee involvement (EI) and the outcomes for workers and companies, but neglect differences between various *forms* of EI.

This article develops a new set of indicators that can be used to distinguish different forms of EI. It draws on case studies of the German, Brazilian and Chinese plants of a German automobile manufacturer (referred to here as 'GerCar') to investigate the factors shaping employee involvement practices. Findings show considerable differences in the design of employee involvement in the three plants. In the German case, EI practices focus

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on self-organization. The Brazilian case is similar to the German case in some respects, but differs in that social involvement activities are accorded a much higher importance. The Chinese case represents a very different EI model that puts considerable emphasis on social involvement and creating work engagement through competitions. These differences are explained by two factors: first, industrial relations (in particular institutionalized labour bargaining rights and the organizational power of trade unions), and second, organizational culture (in particular sector-specific organizational legacies regarding employee involvement).

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical framework. In Section 3, the methods and research field are described. Section 4 is devoted to the case studies in Germany, Brazil and China. Section 5 discusses the explanations for the emergence of different models of employee involvement, while Section 6 concentrates on general conclusions.

2. Employee involvement: state of the research and hypotheses

What Is Employee Involvement and How Can It Be Measured?

Employee involvement (EI) can be understood as encompassing very different practices; sensu stricto, it is usually understood as the direct (face-to-face) participation of individuals or small employee groups in activities and decisions within the company — this is also the understanding in this article. We thus distinguish EI from interest representation through trade unions or works councils and high-level participation in strategic managerial decisions by employee representatives (Marchington and Wilkinson 1992, 2005). Our concept of EI is limited to practices, which are not based on statutory rights of employees, but are usually granted (and thus controlled) by management.

There are various definitions of employee involvement that do, however, overlap to a considerable extent (see Kim *et al*. 2010; Marchington 2007). Marchington and Wilkinson (2005) distinguish between four main dimensions: task-based participation (understood as multi-skilling, job rotation etc.), self-management in teams, participation in problem-solving activities and direct communication between workers and management. We find these dimensions of employee involvement in all classical texts (e.g. Appelbaum *et al*. 2000; Pil and MacDuffie 1996) and in many empirical studies (see Posthuma *et al*. 2013).

Comparative empirical research has mainly focused on measuring the *strength* of EI with the help of additive indexes (e.g. Doellgast *et al*. 2009; Gallie 2009). The implicit assumption has been that there is a universal concept of EI that allows us to add up the various EI practices and classify countries according to EI strength. This argument has particularly been advanced in research on high-involvement work systems (HIWS) (Boxall and Macky 2014).

In contrast to the above-mentioned studies, the dependent variable here is the *form* of employee involvement. I argue that EI is a multi-dimensional

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construct and that it is necessary to distinguish between different forms of EI, with each emphasizing different dimensions and potentially producing different outcomes. Similar arguments were made in the past by Appelbaum and Batt (1994), who identified 'lean production' and 'team production' models in the United States, and by authors comparing Japanese, German and Swedish approaches to work organization and involvement (e.g. Jürgens 1994). Edwards and Wright (2001) and more recently Gallie (2013) also emphasized the multi-dimensionality of the concept of EI.

It is difficult to directly compare EI *strength* if the *form* of EI varies. EI practices have to be analysed as part of management regimes, in which they reflect the interests and goals of different actors and may perform different functions ranging from efficiency goals to strengthening employee commitment and retention. EI can support employee empowerment but also strengthen social control in the workplace (cf. O'Reilly and Chatman 1996). Employee involvement practices are often powerful in shaping behaviour and can be used as a kind of 'social engineering' (Thompson and Findlay 1999). This danger, however, affects some forms of EI more than others.

In the following analysis, we distinguish between four dimensions of EI:

1. Self-organization in teams (including aspects such as multi-skilling and job rotation, defined as 'task-based participation' by Marchington and Wilkinson 2005; see also Appelbaum *et al*. 2000; Gallie 2013): this dimension emphasizes the decision-making in the team.

2. Participation in problem-solving and improvement (Appelbaum *et al*. 2000; Cox *et al*. 2006; Pil and MacDuffie 1996): this dimension focuses on giving employees space to develop their competences and on mobilizing their knowledge for the company.

3. Social involvement activities: this dimension has been neglected so far in the EI research and emphasizes the participation of employees in organizational life and strengthening their belonging to the company; a particular focus lies on the use of competitions (Alferoff and Knights 2003; Bolton and Houlihan 2009; Kinnie *et al*. 2000).

4. Direct employee–management communication (Cox *et al*. 2006; Gallie 2009): this dimension aims at improving the information of employees regarding organizational processes and collecting quick and direct feedback to management.

EI and Industrial Relations

The existing research has shown cross-country differences in EI strength, which fits well with the arguments of the literature on national employment systems (Marsden 1999) and the transfer of employment practices by multinational companies in different institutional settings (Edwards 2004; Ferner *et al*. 2011). Doellgast *et al*. (2009) and Holman *et al*. (2009) emphasize the differences in EI strength between coordinated market economies (CMEs) and liberal market economies (LMEs). They refer to the *varieties of capitalism*

approach (Hall and Soskice 2001) to explain the differences, even though not all national institutional features prove to be of the same importance. In Doellgast's (2012) analysis, labour bargaining rights are decisive for strong EI: high-involvement systems only develop in contexts with ‘strong workplace democracy’ and ‘encompassing collective bargaining’ (Doellgast 2012: 19). Similarly, Holman *et al*. (2009) explain differences in EI with reference to the strength of trade unions and of the vocational education systems (efficient VET creates the conditions for stronger EI). In Gallie's (2009) analysis — and in contrast to the arguments of Doellgast (2009) and Holman *et al*. (2009) — the strength of EI in Germany and the United Kingdom is similar and low compared to the Scandinavian countries. Gallie's conclusion, however, fits with other studies, in that he sees the trade union power as the decisive factor determining EI strength. Similar arguments have been developed in many other studies (e.g. Bélanger *et al*. 2003; Jürgens *et al*. 1993; Turner 1991).

The cases of Germany, Brazil and China — the countries compared here — represent different models of industrial relations. We can illustrate this using the GerCar case. As is typical in the *German* automotive industry, GerCar's German plants are characterized by strong works councils and high union membership. The works council has wide-ranging co-determination rights granted under German law. Representatives of the metalworking union (IG Metall) hold a 95 per cent majority in GerCar's works council and negotiate collective agreements with the company. The relations between management and works councils are highly cooperative. Works councils support the company's goal of maintaining competitiveness and hence, they accept the company's position on lean production. But this acceptance is not unconditional. Team self-organization on the shop floor is seen as a way of giving workers at least a minimum of discretion (see Turner 1991 on the German IG Metall debates about work organization and involvement in the 1980s).

GerCar's *Brazilian* plants are also characterized by strong trade unions, with unionization levels of 80–95 per cent; this is typical for the Brazilian automotive industry in the Sao Paulo region. The trade unions of the plants studied here belong to the metalworking branch of the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT). There are frequent consultations between employee representatives and management that cover not only the usual collective bargaining topics (wages, working time etc.), but also topics such as teamwork and the organization of improvement processes. The unions are characterized by their strong grass-roots orientation, which makes them very sensitive to issues of work autonomy and self-organization in teams.

In *China*, the trade union is a subordinate organization of the Communist Party (Taylor *et al*. 2003). Legislation assigns it an intermediary role between the management and the employees. The tasks of the union include organizing skill competitions, giving awards to model workers and managing social integration activities. The trade union chairman in GerCar's plants is also the Communist Party secretary for the company and takes part in executive board meetings. The trade union is consulted by the management regarding

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all employee-related issues (work safety, working times, wages etc.) and is also involved in important issues on the shop floor: in the selection of team leaders and shop floor supervisors as well as in continuous improvement processes. Due to its links with the Communist Party and its close involvement in shop floor management, the trade union is an influential actor in the company, but it is not a direct voice of the employees. Given the fact that many leaders of the union groups on the shop floor are supervisors, the trade union is also an important mechanism for controlling employees. We can expect that in this setting, workers' self-organization in teams is not a trade union priority.

While we focus here on the role of company-level industrial relations, it is clear that they are strongly influenced by the national regulation as well as by sectoral-level organizations and collective bargaining. Building on the existing literature, we can develop the first hypothesis by putting the emphasis not on the *strength* but on the *form* of EI:

> *Hypothesis 1: Labour bargaining power influences the form of employee involvement. Factories located in countries with stronger labour representation (Germany, Brazil) will be characterized by a stronger focus on self-organization in teams than factories in countries with weaker or less independent labour representation (China)*.

EI and Organizational Culture

While industrial relations strongly influence employee involvement practices, it is not possible to explain the emergence of different forms of EI by industrial relations effects only. In particular, there is no clear relationship between industrial relations and the importance of direct management–employee communication and social involvement. In order to explain these EI dimensions we suggest including cultural effects in the analysis.

'Culture' is often emphasized as an important determinant of EI (see Holman *et al*. 2009: 528 and Edwards 2004: 403). Behaviouralist studies mainly refer to Hofstede's (1991) concept of national cultures. In a study comparing US empowerment concepts, the sociotechnical approach in Europe, and the quality circle concept in Japan, Erez (2010) argues that 'work autonomy' is regarded as positive in cultures that support an individualistic approach and a low power distance. Shapiro and Brett (2005: 169) argue that the absence of involvement in individualistic contexts with low power distances tends to be experienced as injustice, whereas it does not have a particular meaning in other cultural contexts.

It is doubtful, however, whether practices at the organizational level can be explained by national culture. Hofstede himself argued that national cultures define the core societal values but cannot be a direct explanatory factor at the workplace level (Hofstede 1991: 182). In the long debate about the relationship between organizations and culture, many authors emphasized that due to the ubiquity of culture it is of little use 'to explain a phenomenon as brought about by culture' (Sorge and Warner 1986: 34).

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Instead of referring to national cultures, the following analysis assumes that we can identify sector-specific organizational cultures in each country. To be more precise, the analysis focuses on the manufacturing sector and includes only those elements of organizational cultures which are related to EI practices.

Let us briefly look at the three countries under study. Although *German* manufacturing companies were for a long time strongly characterised by paternalistic and authoritarian traditions, the co-determination laws and the 'humanization of work' projects in the 1970s changed organizational cultures (Jürgens 1994; Jürgens *et al*. 1993). Inspired by Swedish forerunners, German automotive companies started to experiment with job enrichment and self-organization in teams, even though none of the companies dared to abandon assembly line work. As lean production became to be regarded as best practice at the beginning of the 1990s, German automotive companies returned to short work cycles and standardized work. Despite this roll back, one element developed in the experimental phase of the 1970s and 1980s remained part of the organizational cultures: the emphasis on self-organization in teams. The notion of self-organization fitted well with the concept of '*Facharbeit'* (which is a combination of technical expertise, practical experience and independent problem-solving capacity and only partially translatable as 'skilled work'), which describes not only the model of vocational education but also an important dimension of organizational culture in German companies and an important reference for workers as well as for supervisors, engineers and managers (cf. Drexel 1997; Jürgens 1994).

The *Brazilian* research literature emphasizes the traditions of authoritarian leadership styles, low trust in management–labour relations and the legacies of a 'fire and hire' approach, all of which leave little space for employee involvement (Humphrey 1982, 1993). These authoritarian and paternalistic legacies were accompanied by traditions of strongly segmented employment structures in Brazilian automotive companies. This segmentation meant high status differences between manual workers, skilled workers, white-collar employees and managers, and hampered the implementation of team work and employee involvement (Humphrey 1993). The first changes to this kind of organizational culture only became evident in the late 1990s and were driven by experiments with high performance work practices due to the implementation of lean production approaches and by trade unions' demands for stronger employee involvement (Rocha 2009).

The few empirical studies about employee involvement practices in *China* emphasize two main legacies shaping organizational cultures: authoritarian leadership styles, but also traditions of mobilizing the workforce in improvement and problem-solving activities. The latter go back to the first 'work group systems' introduced in Chinese factories in the 1960s (Walder 1986). Work groups were elements of the shop floor organization, but also political units that organized the study of Marxist classics and Mao's works. Walder (1986) argues that the Maoist ideology put a strong emphasis on the moral education of the workforce and on socialist competitions between

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factories, teams and individual workers. The Maoist mobilization campaigns ended in the 1970s, but social integration activities and competitions remained an important element of Chinese companies' organizational cultures, as Warner (2008) and Cooke (2008) emphasize. These organizational legacies were drawn on when domestic and multinational companies started to introduce lean production systems and the related teamwork concepts (Chen *et al*. 1997; Yu 2012). Due to this development, work organization in car plants differs from the 'disciplinary management' (Hong 2008) in the textile and electronics industries (cf. Lee 1998). Production systems in automobile companies in China emphasize the mobilization of workers in improvement and problem-solving activities — even if some studies remain sceptical about the level of employee involvement (Danford and Zhao 2012; Zhang 2015).

Against this backdrop, we can formulate the following culture hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2: Organizational cultures influence the form of employee involvement. In Germany, we can expect EI practices that emphasize self-organization in teams. In Brazil, we expect contradictory effects. While the authoritarian traditions should hamper the emergence of any forms of employee involvement, the change of organizational cultures due to the implementation of lean production concepts should provide some basis for employee involvement in at least problem-solving and improvement processes. In China, we expect that employee involvement forms are strongly influenced by the tradition of intense social integration and mobilization activities in the companies.

3. Methods and data

The analysis is based on case studies of the German, Brazilian and Chinese plants of a German automobile manufacturer, which were conducted in the project 'Personnel and Production Systems in the BRIC Countries' (Jürgens and Krzywdzinski 2016). Table 1 shows the basic information about the plants. The automobile industry was selected because it is one of the industries referred to in the paradigmatic studies on lean production and employee involvement (cf. Pil and MacDuffie 1996). Germany is the home of key players in this industry, while Brazil and China are key growth markets. At the same time, these countries differ considerably in institutional and cultural respects.

The case studies were based on qualitative, semi-structured interviews (one to two hours each) conducted by Ulrich Jürgens and Martin Krzywdzinski

TABLE 1
Basic Information about the Studied Locations (2012)

	Germany	*Brazil 1*	*Brazil 2*	*China 1*	*China 2*
Production volume (cars)	800,000	380,000	260,000	1,280,000	1,370,000
Employees	51,000	14,500	4,500	19,700	22,400

Source: Jürgens and Krzywdzinski (2012).

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TABLE 2
Interview Statistics

	Germany	*Brazil 1*	*Brazil 2*	*China 1*	*China 2*
Personnel management	12	9	4	15	13
Production management	8	10	5	15	9
Meister	2	4	4	4	5
Team speaker/team leader	2	3	3	4	4
Workers	0	7	5	5	4
Trade union/works council	6	2	2	3	2
Total	30	35	23	46	37

Source: Jürgens and Krzywdzinski (2012).

between 2009 and 2011. In order to assure the reliability of information, we took care to involve the most important functions and roles in the companies: management and trade union representatives, the different hierarchy levels on the shop floor (workers, team leaders, supervisors, managers) and different functional areas within the management (HR and production management). For a systematic description of the project, its methods and the research field see Jürgens and Krzywdzinski (2016: 19f). Table 2 presents an overview of the interviews. In all cases, the interviews were supplemented by plant tours.

An important challenge in comparative research is translating categories and concepts across different languages, countries and corporate cultures. Ensuring that this translation is correct is crucial for construct validity. We solved this problem by involving a Chinese and a Brazilian partner in our research.[1] Our partners prepared a review of the literature, helped us adapt the questionnaires to the Chinese and Brazilian context and took part in the interviews. As a final check of our interpretations, we presented the results to the companies, asking for comments and corrections.

In order to grasp different forms of EI, it was partially necessary to develop new indicators. Despite considerable overlaps in the basic understanding of EI, existing empirical studies use different indicators depending on the data sets underlying the analysis. In their analysis of EI practices in the United Kingdom based on WERS98, Cox *et al*. (2006), for instance, include indicators for problem-solving groups and management–employee communication; WERS also offers indicators for self-organization in teams, but not for social involvement activities. Gallie (2013) uses the British Skills Survey, which offers indicators on team self-organization, task discretion and consultative participation. Many cross-country studies use the European Working Conditions Survey (e.g. Gallie 2009), which offers indicators for self-organization and autonomy in the teams and for management–employee consultations; there are, however, no indicators for employee involvement in improvement processes (besides the very general question ‘Are you involved in improving the work organization or work processes of your department or organization?’) and for social involvement. Given these limitations, it is difficult to analyse differences in EI forms between countries and/or industries.

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This study follows a unique approach by linking qualitative case studies with a quantitative measurement of core indicators. We hope that this will contribute to building multi-dimensional concepts and measurements of EI. Table 3 illustrates the indicators used for the analysis and the values for the three cases presented in this article — see Section 4 for the detailed empirical analysis. The 'self-organization in teams' dimension is measured by three indicators. The first one is the officially planned time for team meetings — an important precondition for coordination within teams. Like all other indicators, this item uses an ordinal scale from 1 to 4. The different values on the scale represent typical practices in the automotive industry. The second indicator is the topics that can be decided by the teams. The values on the scale once again represent typical practices in automotive manufacturing plants (potential topics include holiday planning, job rotation, training planning). The third indicator is the role of the team leader. The team leader can be an appointed supervisor or an elected coordinator and *primus inter pares*; intermediate forms are also possible, for instance, if the team leader is appointed by the management but he/she has no supervisory functions.

The second dimension, 'improvement activities', is also based on three indicators. The first reflects resources for EI — in this case, problem-solving training for team members. The two other indicators allow us to distinguish between two very different ways of involving workers in improvement activities. The first are team-based activities (e.g. quality circles in Japanese companies). The second form is the participation of workers in expert-based improvement activities. Typically, these are problem-solving groups led by engineers or supervisors and involve experienced workers.

The third dimension is 'social involvement' and it is widely neglected in existing research. The first indicator is social events in the company, which offer employees the opportunity to participate in organizational life and are aimed at creating the feeling of belonging to the organization; they range from formal events to convivial informal meetings between management and employees. The second indicator is competitions. Many such competitions do not aim to achieve narrow efficiency goals (e.g. productivity increases), but rather seek to mobilize employees in group activities and to strengthen commitment. They sometimes represent a 'gamification' element linking fun, learning and work.

The fourth dimension is managerial information and communication activities, which can take different forms (information meetings, employee surveys, plant newspapers and web-based information). We assign all practices the same weight, knowing that this represents a considerable simplification.

The indicators used in the analysis to some extent reflect the particularities of the automotive industry: the dominance of assembly line work, for instance, limits the options for self-organization. The design of the indicators might also be influenced by the fact that they are applied to just one company, a German manufacturer. At the same time, examining plants operated by a single manufacturer has certain advantages. It allows us to hold some factors

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TABLE 3
Employee Involvement in German, Brazilian and Chinese Plants of GerCar

		Germany	*Brazil*	*China*
Self-organization				
1. Resources of self-organization (team meetings)	1 = No team meetings 2 = Short team meetings before shift starts 3 = Regular and longer team meetings (<30 min per week) 4 = Regular and long team meetings (>30 min per week)	4	2.5	2
2. Scope of self-organization in teams	1 = No self-organization One point each for self-organization regarding vacation planning, job rotation, training planning (half point if teams are consulted but cannot decide themselves)	3.5	2.5	1.5
3. Role of the team leader	1 = Appointed superior 2 = Superior, appointed after consultation with the team 3 = Appointed coordinator (team spokesperson) 4 = Elected team spokesperson	4	4	2
Problem-solving and improvement				
4. Involvement of team members in expert-based CIP	1 = No involvement 2 = Occasional involvement depending on situation 3 = Systematic involvement One additional point for consultation with the trade union regarding expert-based CIP activities	3	3	3
5. Team-based improvement processes	1 = No team-based improvement processes 2 = Unsystematic team-based improvement activities (no time and resources allocated to these activities) 3 = Systematic team-based improvement activities involving some of the team members 4 = Systematic team-based improvement activities involving all team members	1	1	2.5
6. Problem-solving competencies of team members	1 = No problem-solving/kaizen training for team members 2 = Teams receive introduction into production system 3 = Micro roles for team members 4 = Systematic development paths within the team including intensive off-the-job training	2	2	3

(*Continued*)

TABLE 3
Continued

		Germany	*Brazil*	*China*
Social involvement				
7. Competitions	1 = No competitions 2 = Few, mainly informal competitions 3 = Several company-wide competitions 4 = Many competitions on individual and team level	1	3	4
8. Activities to support social integration	One point each for social/cultural/sports events in the company, for family-related activities, for informal 'get together' activities between management and workers, for social support activities (for sick employees etc.)	1.5	3	4
Employee-management communication				
9. Information and communication	1 = No information and communication activities One point each for regular management–employees information meetings, employee surveys with feedback activities, plant newspaper and web-based information	4	4	3

Source: Author based on Jürgens and Krzywdzinski (2012).
Note: Brazil scores 2.5 on indicator 1 because only short team meetings were practised at the time of the study, but the introduction of longer team meetings was planned for the near future. China scores 2.5 on indicator 5 because the practices vary between the manufacturing areas. Germany scores 1.5 on indicator 8 because some manufacturing areas practise regular informal 'get together' activities while other do not.

(the production system and the nature of the work process, core features of HRM, corporate culture) that might otherwise influence EI practices relatively constant (cf. Batt and Appelbaum 1995).

4. Empirical analysis

GerCar's German Plant

(a) Self-organization in teams

In the German GerCar plants, teamwork is regulated by agreements between the management and the works council. In the 1970s and 1980s, the company experimented with new concepts of teamwork (in part following Swedish examples) including a considerable expansion of job contents and the implementation of autonomous teams responsible for several work stations (see Turner 1991). The management's conclusion was, however, that this form of work organization was not compatible with mass production (Jürgens

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1994: 203). In the 1990s, the company turned to lean production, and short work cycles on the assembly line once again became the standard model. But the teamwork experiments did leave one important legacy: the idea of self-organization rights of the teams.

In the 1990s, management and works councils concluded a number of plant-level agreements about team work. One of the works council's main demands was that the team spokesperson would remain an elected position and that it not be transformed into a quasi-supervisory function. In 2007, these plant-level agreements were replaced by a general agreement for all German plants.

This agreement emphasizes self-organization in teams. Teams have complex tasks. Besides the direct line work, they are responsible for training and rotation planning, and they autonomously decide how often to rotate jobs. They are also required to take part in improvement activities, to control quality and to ensure the availability of material and equipment. To facilitate self-organization, teams have 30 minutes per week for team meetings. The team spokesperson has a coordinating function within the team: her or she is elected by the team and is not a superior. In order to promote flexibility but also to give all the team members the opportunity to become team spokesperson, the teams are required to promote multi-skilling.

The agreement about teamwork is, however, limited to the German plants. For the plants abroad, GerCar does not have a defined standard regarding teamwork, although some German expat managers implicitly follow the patterns that are used in Germany.

(b) Participation in improvement activities

The improvement activities in GerCar's German plants follow the company's global standard and can be characterized as mainly expert-based (cf. Jürgens 1994 on traditional approaches to continuous improvement in the German automotive industry; see also Jürgens and Krzywdzinski 2016: 221f). The so-called CIP cascade (continuous improvement process) is the main improvement process. The headquarters defines productivity goals for all plants, which are then used to define improvement goals for each shop and unit. Every year, the management organizes workshops for each team in the manufacturing area. These usually take one or two weeks and are directed by trained and certified moderators. The workshop participants include engineers, *Meister* and the team spokespersons from all shifts. The team spokespersons participate as representatives of their teams and their participation is regarded by the management as crucial for ensuring the legitimacy of the process. Rank-and file workers do not usually take part, but they are consulted when the workshop participants try out the improvement ideas. Purely team-based improvement activities (e.g. the quality circles at Toyota) do not exist in GerCar's German operations.

Problem-solving teams constitute the second pillar of the improvement processes. The teams are usually appointed by the management to work on one main problem. They are composed of engineers, shop-floor supervisors, team spokespersons and sometimes also experienced production workers. These

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workers play an important role, but only a small number of well-trained and experienced workers get the opportunity to be involved.

The individual improvement suggestions are a further form of improvement activity. Rewards are given for improvement suggestions according to the savings they generate. The German main plant and other German locations receive on average 0.5 improvement suggestions per employee and year.

(c) Communication and social involvement

There are relatively few social involvement activities in the German plants. The company sometimes organizes cultural events, and some departments and areas informally organize activities, for instance, a bowling league for supervisors. In general, however, it is not common to link leisure time and company life.

It is also very unusual to use competitions at the individual or team level. The works council is strongly opposed to such forms of involvement, because it fears that they might increase the work intensity and performance pressure on employees.

To communicate with employees, the management and the works council present the main developments and plans of the company in quarterly assemblies attended by all employees. There have been few, if any, attempts by management to develop employee consultation channels independent of the works council and the trade union. The yearly employee survey is the main non-union channel of communication. It is conducted in all plants worldwide and uses a standardized procedure and questionnaire. Every unit — and in the manufacturing areas, every *Meister* — receives its results and supervisors are obliged to discuss them with their subordinates.

(d) Summary

To sum up, EI practices in GerCar's German plants focus on self-organization in teams, while involvement in improvement activities is practised only in relatively limited forms. Social involvement plays only a very limited role.

GerCar's Brazilian Plant

(a) Self-organization in teams

In the 1990s, the Brazilian plants of GerCar underwent a modernization process linked to the introduction of a standardized production system in line with the German parent organization (Jürgens and Krzywdzinski 2016: 223). Like the German plants, the Brazilian plants governed this process via an agreement between the management and the trade union. This agreement was concluded in 2000 and it defines the organizational structure of the shop floor, the roles of the supervisory levels as well as the tasks and rights of the teams.

The teams have their own ‘rights of consultation and participation’ including the right to elect the team spokesperson, implement improvements in the team area, make decision about the contents of team meetings and job

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rotation. Multi-skilling is regarded as necessary to allow job rotation, which usually takes place several times per day.

Similar to the situation in the German plants, the election of the team spokesperson is a central right of the team. The team spokesperson is not a supervisor, but the position is regarded as a stepping-stone to the cell leader position (as the *Meister* are called in GerCar's Brazilian plants).

Although weekly team meetings of 30 minutes are regarded as standard at GerCar, they were not practised in the Brazilian plants. Due to the lack of time, the teams had few opportunities to actually take on responsibility for job rotation, multi-skilling and holiday planning. Most of these tasks were performed by the team spokesperson, who only consulted with the teams. A production manager commented:

> If you ask me whether the meetings take place regularly and with discipline, I can tell you it is not the case. […] We have a line and we would have to stop the line. In 100% of the cases, our priority is to have the volume, to be honest. (Interview BVP4)

The lack of time for self-organization reflects the management's limited interest in this issue. The management's priorities were to decentralize the shop-floor organization and to strengthen the position of the cell leader. Self-organization in the teams was accepted in order to gain the trade union's support for the change programme. The trade union, on the other hand, hoped to achieve a flatter hierarchy structure and to push back authoritarian leadership styles.

(b) Participation in improvement activities

The CIP cascade and the problem-solving teams are the main types of improvement activities in the Brazilian plants and are implemented in accordance with the above-described corporate standards. The implementation of improvement measures is one of the rights and duties of teams in GerCar's Brazilian plants. However, there is little evidence of these rights and duties in the ‘real life’ of the shop floor. The improvement activities are led by experts, engineers and supervisors, similar to the practice in the German parent organization. There is an individual suggestion scheme, which motivated on average 0.5 improvement suggestions per employee and year in 2009 and 2010.

It is therefore not surprising that team members and team spokespersons do not receive systematic training in problem-solving and improvement methods. The only training related to these topics takes place directly after recruitment. The company planned to introduce basic training for team spokespersons including training in improvement process methods. At the time of this study, however, this training had not yet been implemented.

(c) Communication and social involvement

The comprehensive social involvement activities at GerCar in Brazil differ from the German case and developed as a reaction to labour conflicts in the plants (cf. Humphrey 1982). The company is trying to promote a ‘cultural

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change' (Interview BVP9) and a cooperative attitude among the trade union and the management. The involvement of employees in direct communication with management and in social activities in the company is regarded as a way of building this new organizational culture (Jürgens and Krzywdzinski 2016: 282).

The strategy for improving information and communication involves the so-called *Mega Dialogos*. Once a month, the line stops and all shop managers talk to the employees about important developments and events. In addition, each cell leader has to hold a monthly meeting with his or her subordinates and discuss the situation in the unit. In order to get feedback from the employees, each shop has created a so-called 'information group', composed of two or three employees. The information group meets with representatives from HR twice a month and talks about problems it has collected from employees. There are annual employee surveys that are conducted and communicated within the plant in a similar manner to the German plants.

Competitions are an important dimension of employee involvement and are meant to promote social integration in the company. There is an annual company-wide competition for all kinds of projects, which contribute to hitting the company's targets regarding quality, productivity, but also work safety or ergonomics. Each year, the company organizes a ceremony and awards prizes to several projects. The emphasis is on providing recognition for the participants and celebrating them.

All shops organize competitions on a smaller scale. There are monthly rankings of all units in every shop regarding quality, productivity and employee attendance, which are displayed on huge boards with photos of the cell leaders. There are no monetary incentives linked to the rankings and no (or at least no public) sanctions for bad results. The aim is to give recognition for good results, as a production manager explains:

> Every month we get the results and the ranking. Every month we give a trophy to the winning cell. […] At the end of the year we award the overall winner cell. We have a big party to give the award and celebrate the winners: the best, the second best and the third best cell. (Interview BVP13)

The competitions are accompanied by a large number of social integration events. They were introduced during the 2000s as a response to authoritarian leadership styles and conflicts between shop-floor supervisors and workers. There are a huge number of activities, starting with small events for Women's Day, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Children's Day, Carnival, Festa de Junho and Christmas, which take place during the breaks. There are periodic factory tours for the families of the employees. While these events are coordinated centrally for the whole plant, there are many additional shop-specific events, for instance, concerts by employee bands and sports and karaoke competitions.

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(d) Summary

To sum up, self-organization in teams is an important element of EI practices in GerCar's Brazilian plants even though it is implemented with less managerial support than in Germany. There is a similar level of involvement in improvement activities as in Germany. One important difference to the German plants is the extensive social involvement activities.

GerCar's Chinese Plant

(a) Self-organization in teams

GerCar's Chinese plants are joint ventures operated together with a Chinese partner, which opens the door for the influence of specific Chinese legacies. Until the second half of the 1990s, GerCar's Chinese plants developed their own production systems that had a strong focus on Japanese concepts and maintained the influence of traditional Chinese approaches. Although they started to implement the company's standardized production system at the end of the 1990s, the understanding of teamwork present here still differs from the German and the Brazilian cases (Jürgens and Krzywdzinski 2016: 255f). From the point of view of the management in both Chinese plants under study, self-organization within the teams is not a priority. German managers commented that, in their experience, the Communist Party — which is still present and influential in companies — regards self-organization with mistrust (Interviews CVH27 and CVP16).

The teams do not have resources for self-organization, for instance, in the form of time for longer team meetings. Job rotation, multi-skilling and attendance planning are the responsibility of the team leader (*Ban Zhang*) in cooperation with the *Gong Zhang*, as the hierarchical equivalent of the German *Meister* is called in Chinese. Job rotation usually only occurs at intervals of several months and only for multi-skilling reasons.

The fact that teams lack self-organization capabilities, however, does not mean that team members are not involved in team organization issues. In our interviews, the *Gong Zhang* argued that they encourage team leaders to delegate responsibilities to the teams. They emphasized, however, that they do not favour the delegation of responsibilities to the whole team but rather to the most engaged team members — the so-called ‘core team members’ (*Gu Gan*) — in order to train and prepare them for higher functions. Team member participation in the Chinese operations is clearly selective in character.

The core team members are at the top of a micro hierarchy in the teams (Jürgens and Krzywdzinski 2016: 256). They work on the more demanding jobs and support the team leader in activities such as training new team members, organizing the team and problem-solving. At China 2, the concept of the core team members is called the ‘five officers’ (*Wu Da Yuan*): the safety officer, the logistics officer, the quality officer, the equipment officer and the deputy team leader. A team leader describes the concept as follows:

> Take the example of the safety officer. He is in charge of leading the workers in shouting out the safety slogan at the morning meeting. Moreover, he is in

> charge of the safety column on the team board. […] He takes care of the safety-related documents, holds the safety-related meetings and gives lectures about safety operation criteria for the other workers. (Interview CVS19)

The core team members in the Chinese plant have more responsibility than is the case for normal team members in GerCar's German plants. This participation is, however, restricted to workers with the potential to become team leaders or experts. Participation is not a general right that extends to the whole team.

A particular form of participation is evident in the selection process of the team leader. In contrast to the German plants, the team leader is the first hierarchical level in the Chinese plants. The selection is based on a process that includes a test of job-related skills, an evaluation of leadership skills and technical knowledge, and an 'opinion survey' among the candidate's team. The team evaluates the candidate with respect to his or her work discipline, motivation to learn, thinking based on collective interests, organization and coordination capabilities, leadership skills and job-related and technical knowledge.

This practice of surveying team members is remarkable. It gives the team members the opportunity to influence the selection of the team leader. The 'opinion survey' forces the team to think about the competences required of the team leader from the company's point of view and several of the interviewed team leaders and workers reported that it increases the acceptance of team leaders.

(b) Participation in improvement activities

The improvement processes in the Chinese plants reflect GerCar's global standards. The CIP cascade and the problem-solving workshops are the main improvement processes. In addition, there is also a system for individual improvement suggestions, which is strongly promoted. As is typical at GerCar, individual improvement suggestions are rewarded according to the savings they generate. The Chinese plants lead the company-internal improvement suggestions rankings, with 11 suggestions per employee and year (2009) — far ahead of the German and Brazilian plants.

The Chinese shop floor has some distinctive features. In particular at China 2, there is a long tradition of problem-solving activities at the team level and the *Meister*-unit level and this also involves the core team members. A *Meister* working in the assembly shop at China 2 explains:

> I usually decide the focus of improvement activities every quarter and assign the task to the relevant team. For example, I may decide that one of the themes is equipment kaizen. Then I assign the task to the team leader whose team's technical process is more related to equipment use than the others. In addition, there are also some cases when the team leaders bring their kaizen ideas to me. In this case the team leader and the core team members discuss it before it is presented to me. (Interview CVS26)

The Chinese plants differ from the Brazilian plants regarding the training for production workers. In addition to the initial two-week training for newly

recruited workers mentioned already in the Brazilian case, the micro-roles that core team members are assigned give them the opportunity to acquire knowledge about quality, safety, logistics and equipment, which can also be used in improvement processes. The team leaders also receive a special two-week training course, including a deeper introduction to the production system.

(c) Communication and social involvement

At the Chinese plants, we find comprehensive social integration activities, which bear some similarity to our findings for Brazil. A striking characteristic is the huge number of competitions that are held (Jürgens and Krzywdzinski 2016: 260). All these activities are organized jointly by the management and the trade union. There are awards for the teams with the best results in CIP workshops and for the best problem-solving teams. The problem-solving teams also take part in competitions at the level of the Chinese parent company. The winners at this level are sent to the provincial-level competition and to national-level competitions. There are further team competitions for the implementation of the production system standards. In addition, on a monthly basis, each shop gives awards to the teams with the best results regarding quality and multi-skilling.

These team competitions are supplemented by the more than 100 skill competitions that are organized on an annual basis by the union. A production manager explains the incentive effects of the competitions as follows:

> The result and the certificates are displayed in the plant. […] Hundreds of workers see the result and this is a major motivation. The result also plays a role in promotion. (Interview CVP4)

The competitions take place after regular working time. Besides the career incentives (workers need a positive participation record in order to become team leaders), there are also monetary incentives.

Competitions are accompanied by a large number of sports and cultural events, celebrations and family activities (e.g. factory tours for the families). The trade union organizes health treatments for sick employees and holiday trips.

We do not find any direct forms of communication comparable to the *Mega Dialogo*s in the Brazilian plants. However, employee surveys are conducted every year. Each supervisor receives the results for his or her unit and has to discuss them with his or her subordinates. However, this standard poses particular problems in China where the ‘face’ culture (Earley 1997) and the importance of seniority make open criticism of superiors very difficult. In order to deal with this problem, the management of China 1 decided that discussions of the survey results would take place without the superiors — an interesting innovation in a social context marked by a high power distance. Employees discuss how to improve the situation in their unit and send the results of the discussion to HR, which then gets in touch with the respective superior.

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(d) Summary

GerCar‘s Chinese plants show much greater involvement of workers in improvement activities than in Germany and Brazil. This is accompanied by extensive social involvement activities; however, self-organization in teams is not regarded by the management as an important EI dimension.

5. Discussion: the sources of variation

Figure 1 compares the employee involvement forms. The results confirm Hypotheses 1 and 2. GerCar's German plants are characterized by an approach to employee involvement that can be called the ‘self-organization’ model, while social involvement activities are only weakly developed. The Brazilian plants exhibit considerable similarities to their German counterparts regarding self-organization in teams, even though this dimension is not as strong as in Germany. The Brazilian plants also differ from the German ones regarding the higher importance of social involvement activities. The Chinese plants, by contrast, take a considerably different approach, which we describe as ‘competition and social integration’. The concept of self-organization in teams does not play a role. Surprisingly, however, we find considerably greater team involvement — or, more precisely, greater core-team-member involvement — in improvement processes. So far, the argument resembles earlier classifications of EI models developed by Appelbaum and Batt (1994) or Jürgens (1994). A particular feature, however, is that this form of involvement goes together with a strong culture of social integration and competitions. An important reason for the distinctiveness of the Chinese plants is surely the presence of a Chinese joint-venture partner.

Table 4 summarizes the determinants and the outcomes regarding the dominant EI logic

The industrial relations systems explain the importance of team self-organization as part of EI practices. Strong and independent employee representation with extensive bargaining power and rights seems to be an important precondition for self-organization practices on the shop floor. This is the case in Germany and, to a lesser extent, in Brazil. In the Chinese case, the subordination of the trade union to the priorities defined by the Communist Party — to increase company productivity — lead the trade union to accept managerial concepts of EI that put the emphasis on involvement in improvement activities. This involvement is embedded in a dense web of social involvement activities, which are an important pillar of social control by superiors, trade union representatives and the Communist Party. For this reason and despite the union's considerable formal rights and resources, we characterize the Chinese case as one of weak representation of labour interests.

Organizational cultures prove particularly relevant regarding social involvement activities. These practices are important in Brazil and in China, but less so in Germany. However, the relationship between organizational

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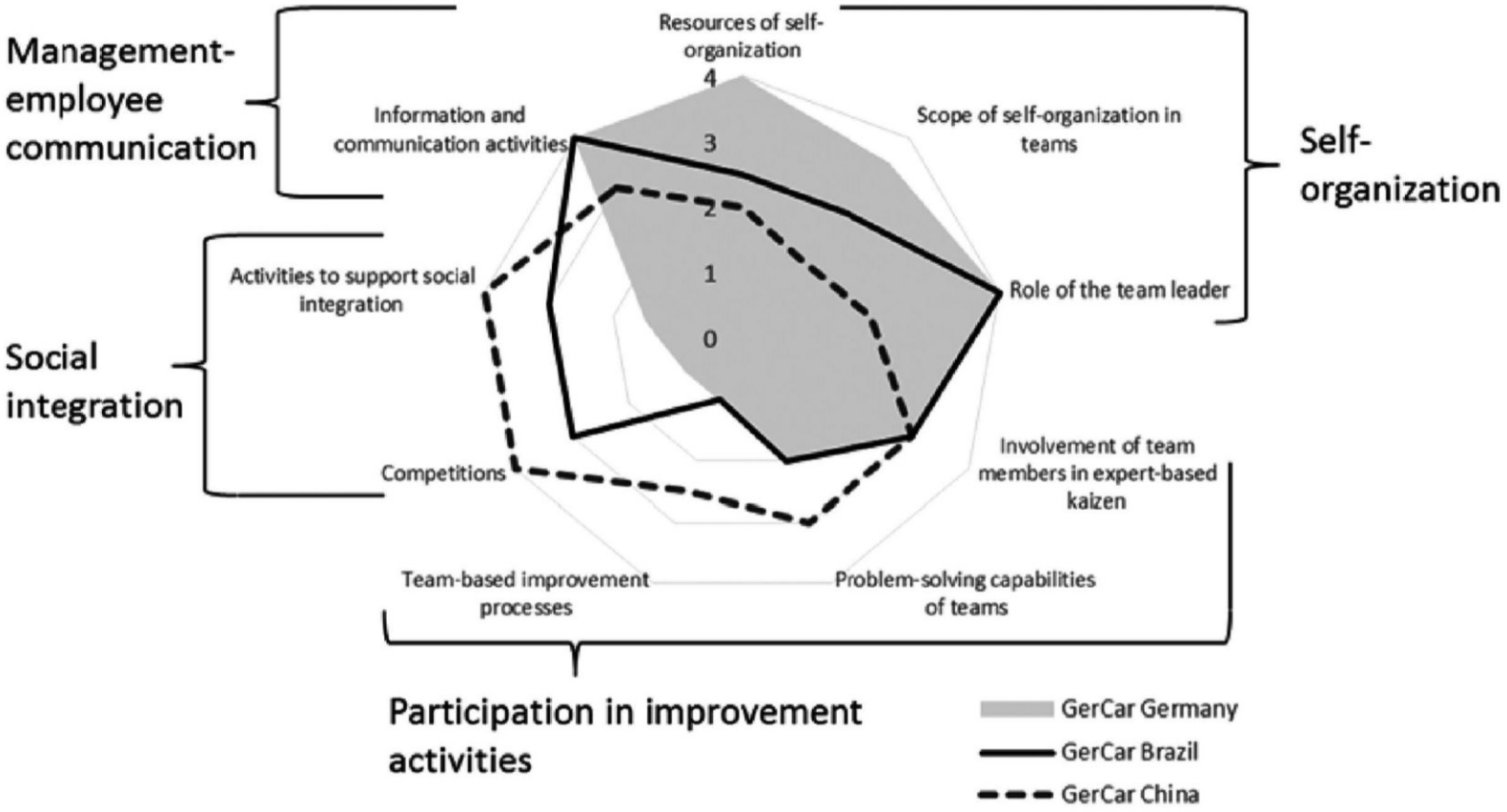
FIGURE 1
Profiles of Employee Involvement Practices in Germany, Brazil and China.



Source: Author.

TABLE 4
EI Models and Their Determinants

Outcome: Dominant EI logic *Determinants*	*Self-organization (Germany)*	*Self-organization and social involvement (Brazil)*	*Competition and social involvement (China)*
Industrial relations	Strong trade union, codetermination, cooperative industrial relations	Strong trade union, industrial relations evolve towards more cooperation	State-controlled trade union committed to cooperation with management
Organizational cultures (elements related to employee involvement)	Emphasis on 'Facharbeit' (skilled production work) and legacies of Humanization of Work projects	Management and trade unions interested to change authoritarian organizational cultures	Traditions of social involvement and 'socialist competitions', seniority-based authority norms

culture and social involvement activities differs in Brazil and China. In Brazil, social involvement activities were developed to weaken authoritarian and paternalistic legacies, while in China they are part of paternalistic traditions. What makes them particularly resilient is their connection with political activities aimed at creating loyalty to the Communist Party.

Organizational culture — in particular, authoritarian legacies — does exert some influence on self-organization in teams, but this influence is less clear. The traditional Confucian authority norms in China support the development of micro hierarchies in teams, but they are not conducive to the idea of self-organization. The Brazilian case shows, however, that it is also possible for company actors to attempt to break with cultural traditions. The top management and the trade union in the Brazilian plants shared the aim of changing the authoritarian traditions that they saw represented by the leadership style of the first-line supervisors.

This article does not aim at presenting an analysis of the outcomes of EI practices regarding job satisfaction or job quality. Our main reason for not doing so is that our research is based on a limited number of interviews with workers, which allows only very cautious interpretations. In addition, literature shows that satisfaction with EI practices is greatly influenced by individual characteristics (membership of a union, educational and skill level, personality etc.), which cannot be controlled here (Mohr and Zoghi 2008; Vidal 2007). The interviews do not provide clear evidence that certain EI practices (be they 'self-organization' or 'competition and social integration') enjoy stronger acceptance among employees. Workers mentioned both positive and negative aspects of all the EI practices we studied. In the German and Brazilian plants, they viewed the opportunities for self-organization in teams, and in particular, the possibility to elect (and to recall) the team spokesperson, positively. At the same time, they emphasized that assembly line work only offers limited space for self-organization. Given these

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limits, one should not overestimate the impact of the 'self-organization' EI model on job satisfaction (see Gallie 2013 for a similarly mixed evaluation).

The workers in the Chinese plants had mixed feelings about the 'competition and social integration' approach. Our interviews show that the involvement of core team members in evaluating team leader candidates and in the improvement activities considerably contributed to the acceptance and legitimacy of shop-floor rules and processes (Krzywdzinski 2017). In this sense, EI worked as a way to align workers' attitudes to the company's goals. The social involvement and the competitions — which are also meant to strengthen workers' commitment to the company — were viewed positively by the workers and seen as an opportunity to get recognition for skills and knowledge. At the same time, workers complained about long working days and emphasized that competitions and problem-solving activities make their working hours even longer. Given these pros and cons, we can expect the impact of the EI practices here to also be mixed. This fits with the findings of Wood *et al*. (2012) that the impact of employee involvement on workers is mediated by worker well-being. In their study, EI only had a positive impact on motivation and performance if it was perceived as part of a mutual gains model.

6. Conclusions

This paper builds on comparative studies of EI practices that emphasize the role of labour bargaining rights and power (Doellgast 2012; Gallie 2009; Holman *et al*. 2009). It confirms this factor's importance, but adds also organizational cultures as an important determinant of EI in companies. In contrast to many studies focusing on the 'OECD world', this article compares factories in a developed industrialized country (Germany) with factories in two emerging economies (Brazil and China).

This paper goes beyond the dominant approach in cross-country comparative EI research, which involves measuring the *strength* of EI. The analysis here shows that even in the same company, we can distinguish between different *forms* of employee involvement rooted in different institutions of industrial relations and different organizational cultures.

One consequence is that comparative analysis of EI has to be based on a complex set of indicators that allow us to capture *different forms*. This paper develops an initial suggestion for how to design a more comprehensive set of indicators.

A second consequence is that one has to be cautious when comparing the strength of EI without taking into account differences in form. If we had simply added the indicators used in this article to compare EI practices in German, Brazilian and Chinese plants, we would have concluded that EI strength is relatively similar in all three cases. This interpretation hides, however, the different functional logics of EI practices in the case studies. The EI forms in Germany and Brazil represent compromises between managerial

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and trade union concepts, while this is not the case in China. In the Chinese plant, EI is strongly dominated by management goals, which are, however, not limited to promoting higher efficiency, but are also aiming at providing opportunities to learn and recognition as well as strengthening the sense of belonging to the company.

The analysis in this paper emphasizes the importance of social involvement activities and in particular competitions in the Brazilian and Chinese cases. Given the huge investment by management in these activities and the growing number of empirical studies related to this phenomenon (Alferoff and Knights 2003; Bolton and Houlihan 2009; Mollick and Rothbard 2014), it is surprising that they have been neglected so far in the EI research. They represent important managerial tools for shaping the behaviour of employees and strengthening their commitment and engagement. Their examination is an important field for future empirical research.

The forms of employee involvement presented here are not exhaustive. They are influenced by the specific sectoral context of the automotive industry and by the selected country cases. In companies from different sectors (e.g. services) and in locations in different countries, we might find different approaches to employee involvement. Another limit of the analysis is that it focuses on formal practices and neglects informal EI forms (cf. Marchington and Suter 2013).

We still lack a systematic comparative analysis of employee involvement. One possible hypothesis to be examined by future research is that there is a tension between self-organization, on the one hand, and extensive social integration activities and competitions meant to create a strong corporate culture on the other. Due to this tension, the actual forms of employee involvement might cluster around two types: the self-organization type and the competition/social integration type. Another open question is how different constellations of employee involvement practices influence motivation, commitment and work satisfaction.

Note

1. The interviews in Brazil were conducted with the support of Adriana Marotti de Mello (University of Sao Paulo) and in China with the support of Yu Nan (Jilin University).

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